

MAPLE (*Acer*, all species)

FLOWERS: April - May

DESCRIPTION: Leaves of the maple trees are opposite, borne simply on stalks (the exception is box elder which is compound) usually with three or five (rarely seven) lobes. Species vary in leaf and flower color as well as lobe spaces and shape.

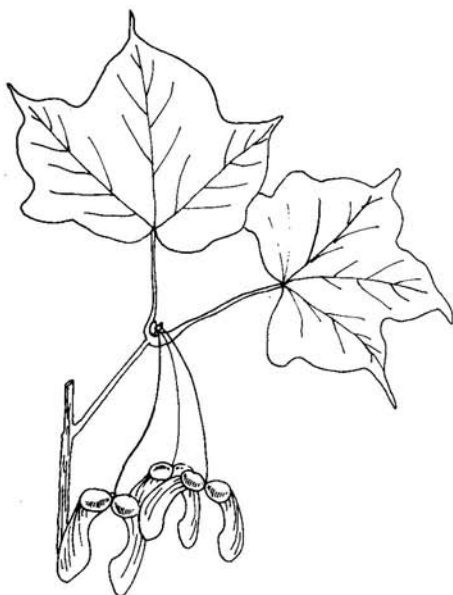
134

HABITAT: Wooded slopes, along streams, base of bluffs, borders of limestone upland glades, low wet woods

LOCATION: Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*) is statewide; other species are scattered.

COLLECTION: Fruits, April - June; Sap, February; Inner bark, April - May

USES: Syrup, vegetable, breadstuff



Several years ago I did a unit on Maple Sugaring with Liz Matheny at Camp Wyman. Using a 3/8" bit in our brace, we drilled a 4" hole for the spile. Number 10 tin cans were attached to the spile and covered with a plastic bag to keep out the dust and insects. As the sap began to flow, the buckets were collected and stored until some 150 gallons were accumulated. Liz kept a hot fire going all night and boiled the sap until we had four gallons of syrup.

It takes between 40 and 80 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup, depending upon the sugar content of the tree. Sugar maples have a high yield of syrup while the silver maple requires a larger amount of sap to produce a whiter and, some say, sweeter syrup.

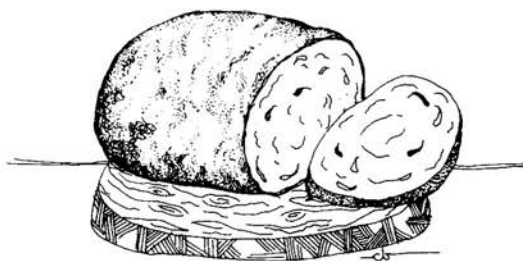
Regardless of the tree, it is a special treat to have the maple syrup you have just made covering pancakes for breakfast!

My classroom at school encourages a great deal of experiential education. The class did a unit on Pioneers in which we collected sap and made syrup. One year February was 70 degrees and beautiful. I was late in getting started and the syrup was not good; however, each year I now include Maple Sugaring as a part of my winter curriculum. Interest is always high in checking out the sap cans we put up on trees around the school yard.

Another interesting edible from this tree is the fruit. As a child I loved pinching the seed pod and expelling the wet center at a person within my aim and squirting range. These same weapons became a source of wonderment as I watched the "helicopters" spiral to the ground. Little did I realize then that they encased a vegetable.

This vegetable, not unlike green peas, should be collected while the fruit is green. Shell off the wings and boil in water for several minutes. Drain off the water and add butter and salt.

Various Indian tribes gathered the inner bark of maple trees, dried the strips, then pounded it into a flour to be used in making bread. I personally have not tried this experiment. It is a puzzle to me how one could shave off the inner bark without defacing, or worse, killing the tree.



COMMON MILKWEED

(*Asclepias syriaca*)

FLOWERS: May - August

DESCRIPTION: Stout stems, unbranching with entire leaves which are opposite. The leaf has a broad midrib which is reddish in color and downy on the under side. Milkweed Family.

HABITAT: Rocky woods, glades, prairies, stream banks, wet meadows, dry ridge tops

LOCATION: Scattered except in lowlands of southeast, south-central, and southwest Missouri

COLLECTION: May - August

USES: Potherb, vegetable, chewing gum, salad



CAUTION: The young shoots of milkweed and the young shoots of the poisonous plant dogbane (*Apocynum androsaemifolium*) might be confused when the plant is just coming up. See CAUTIONS for both milkweed and dogbane on pages 224 and 225.

The milkweed has a special memory in my foraging attempts. When I was looking for milkweed one spring, I thought I had discovered the six-inch shoots poking above the ground and immediately cut enough for dinner. After three one-minute cooking sessions in boiling water, ten minutes of more boiling and cooking, and seasoning, I tasted one of the vilest, most repulsive vegetables it has ever been my misfortune to stick into my mouth! More reading and a mature plant later proved my "milkweed"

to be the poisonous Indian hemp or dogbane! It would be a good idea to check these out before hunting milkweed because they look surprisingly alike when coming up. The leaves of the common milkweed have a reddish vein on top of the leaf with a smooth surface on the bottom. As they get older, they do not remotely resemble each other; it is only as they are coming up that they play twins.

After that experience, it is a wonder I ever regained the trust of my family to sample my edibles. I got several books on poison plants in the United States and did some research in that field before continuing my search for the edibles. Fernald and Kinsey include a section on poisonous plants in their book, *Edible Wild Plants of Eastern North America*. Not only that, but they point out similarities between look alike poisonous and edible plants.

137

I'm still not fond of milkweed shoots although it may be linked to my miserable mistake. You can believe that it took some fancy backpaddling to make my family comfortable about eating some of my culinary wilds for the next couple of weeks.

Milkweed has a very bitter quality and care must be taken to boil this out before eating. Three or four short (1-2 minute) waters, using boiling water to cover each time, helps to disperse the undesired taste. The fourth time, cook for 10-12 minutes, drain and douse with butter.

The buds are my favorite vegetable from this plant. They may be picked while in tight buds and served as you would broccoli. Cook in two short boiling water baths and then in salted water for another minute. Douse with butter and eat. They are a good substitute for broccoli in a casserole. Combine 2 cups cooked spaghetti, 1 can mushroom soup, $\frac{1}{2}$ can water, 1 cup diced ham, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup milkweed buds, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated cheese. Mix and bake at 350 degrees for 30 or 40 minutes.

The buds are excellent raw in a salad of wildings.

Following the buds, the pods are the next edible product. When picked very young and small, and cooked as directed for milkweed shoots, they are passable to add to a roast or serve as a vegetable.

The Indians are said to have used milkweed a great deal in their diet and perhaps cultivated the plant. They supposedly obtained a gum by allowing the milky juice to ooze out, harden slightly, set overnight by a fire, collect together, and then it was ready to chew. My daughters and I have never been successful in making gum. Our specialty seems to be messy messes! Regardless, it is a fascinating experiment and, who knows, one of these times we may just come up with competition for Wrigley's!

SWAMP MILKWEED

(*Asclepias incarnata*)

FLOWERS: June - August

DESCRIPTION: Flower structure typical with the forward and swept-back petal arrangement, small umbels. Leaves narrow, pointed tips, smooth. Milkweed Family.

HABITAT: Wet meadows,
river bottom areas,
pond borders, railroads

LOCATION: Scattered

COLLECTION: June -
September

USES: Vegetable



CAUTION: See page 225

Swamp milkweed is used in the same manner as the common milkweed. One of the reasons for starting each cooking bath in hot rather than cold water is that the bitterness seems to leave the milkweed when hot water is used. Milkweed cooked by using cold water and brought to a boil seems to have the bitter quality "set in."

My favorite part is the flower umbel in tight bud stage. Cook the buds in three boiling water changes for a couple of minutes each. The buds are excellent.

Two good casseroles for these attractive buds are listed below. Check the casserole under Common Milkweed as the swamp milkweed buds are interchangeable in that recipe also.

Swamp Milkweed Casserole is prepared by sauteing ½ cup chopped onion, 1 cup chopped celery, 1 T parsley in ½ stick of oleo. Add 1 can mushroom soup and 2/3 stick garlic or plain cheese and cook until the cheese melts. Layer swamp milkweed, 2 cups cheese mixture in greased casserole and bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes.

Scalloped Swamp Milkweed is also very good. Saute ¼ cup diced onion, using 6 T butter. Add 2 T flour and ¼ cup water. Mix salt, 2 beaten eggs, ¼ lb. processed cheese, and 2 cups drained, cooked swamp milkweed. Bake in a greased casserole at 325 degrees for 30 minutes.

The pods of swamp milkweed are thinner, smoother and longer than those of the common milkweed. They are, in my opinion, also better to eat. They resemble the day lily buds, which is a compliment supreme! I've used them in a pot roast along with potatoes and carrots; I've boiled them and served with butter. Both ways are good.

I froze several packages of the pods in a fresh-freeze state. I have not fixed the frozen variety in a way that is as palatable as the fresh product.

I also dried some of the blossom buds and find that they revive relatively well when soaked in water and cooked as directed above.

The fibers of the swamp milkweed stalk make a thread-like string used for cordage and stitchery.

Maybe I like the swamp milkweed because of the water nearby, or perhaps I enjoy the cute raccoon tracks I usually find. Whatever the reason, swamp milkweed is a wild edible I like very much.

HENBIT (*Lamium
amplexicaule*)

FLOWERS: February -
November

DESCRIPTION: Square-
stemmed plant, lipped
flowers, scalloped,
rounded leaves. Upper
leaves clasp stem,
lower ones on stalk.
Mint Family.

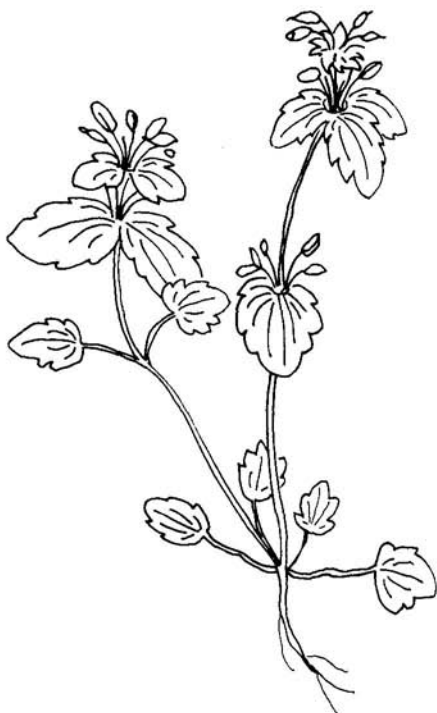
140

HABITAT: Lawns, meadows,
pastures, cultivated and
fallow fields, waste
ground, roadsides,
railroads

LOCATION: Scattered

COLLECTION: February -
November

USES: Potherb, salad



Henbit is a small flowering member of the mint family often found in yards. Next time you see this little fellow, pick him and wash the tips. Cook them slowly in no more water than is necessary, then add a dab of butter and season. Spring onions will give a neat touch.

This specimen of early spring adds a slightly minty flavor to a tossed wild salad.

There's more than one way to clear your yard of unwanted greenery. EAT THOSE WEEDS!!

MINT (*Labiatae*)

HORSEMINT (*Monarda russeliana*)...south, central and eastern Missouri

BEE BALM or OSWEGO TEA (*Monarda didyma*)...sparsely reported

WILD BERGAMOT (*Monarda fistulosa*)...scattered statewide

OHIO HORSEMINT (*Blephilia ciliata*)...southern and eastern Missouri

WOOD MINT (*Blephilia hirsuta*)...most common in counties bordering the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, as well as other rivers

PENNYROYAL (*Hedeoma pulegioides*)...statewide

SLENDER MOUNTAIN MINT (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*)
...statewide

DITTANY (*Cunila origanoides*)...throughout the Ozark region

SPEARMINT (*Mentha spicata*)...scattered in southern and central Missouri

PEPPERMINT (*Mentha piperita*)...scattered in central and southern Missouri

CATNIP (*Nepeta cataria*)...lightly scattered statewide

141

FLOWERS: Varying,
April - October

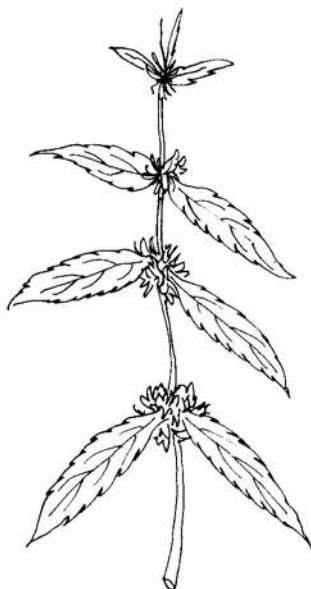
DESCRIPTION: Square stem,
opposite leaves. Mint
as a family covers many
edibles and range in
colors of red, purple,
pink, lavender, white.
Mint Family.

HABITAT: Woods, fields,
rocky soil, good soil,
abandoned areas,
inhabited areas

LOCATION: Statewide

COLLECTION: March -
October

USES: Tea, seasoning, jelly,
mint sauce, wafer



A great many edibles occur in this grouping of mints — wild bergamot or horsemint, bee balm, spearmint, peppermint, pennyroyal, catnip, skullcap, wood mint and others. The minty smell from a crushed leaf and the square stem, characteristic of all mints, makes these plants easy to identify.

142 I dry the leaves of any of the mints and use them for teas. The leaves may be dried by placing them on waxed paper in the kitchen or attic, turning occasionally, and leaving until thoroughly dried. This may be several weeks. Another method of drying the leaves is to place them in a cheese cloth and hang it near the ceiling of your kitchen or attic. When they are thoroughly dried, place in a jar and cap until ready for use. To make tea, crush the dried leaf and allow a teaspoon per one or two cups of hot water, depending upon the desired strength. To make tea from fresh leaves, add 4-5 leaves per cup of hot water and allow it to steep for 3-5 minutes.

Peppermint and spearmint are used as a seasoning spice in any recipe calling for mint. Another pleasant use is to stick a fresh sprig of mint in a glass of iced tea or lemonade. Better yet, freeze the fresh leaf in an ice cube for your drink.

Your next cocktail might be a "spirited" affair in which you serve mint juleps. There are many recipes and opinions on fixing mint juleps. Some crush the leaves, pour bourbon over them and allow the liquid to permeate for several hours, strain and serve over crushed ice with a mint sprig. Others add a mint syrup, made from boiling mint and sugar in water, to the bourbon. Still others merely add the sprig of mint to rum, brandy or bourbon. Whatever your fancy, my suggestion is not to try all varieties the same day!

Mint jelly is delicious served with lamb or venison in a sauce. To make a mint jelly, it is best to use apples, mayapples or crab apples as the jelly base and source of pectin. Cover the quartered or sliced apples and cook for 10 to 15 minutes. Drain off the liquid and add one-half cup of fresh mint leaves, two tablespoons of lemon juice and a couple drops of green food coloring to the apple liquid. Stir and add a cup of sugar for each cup of liquid. When the mixture is ready, strain off the mint leaves and pour into sterilized jars.

A fresh mint sauce which may be served with lamb is as follows: marinate a good-sized handful of leaves, approximately one-half cup, with sugar, water and vinegar. Use 4 or 5 tablespoons of sugar, half a cup of distilled vinegar, and 4 tablespoons of water for the mint and marinate at least two hours in the refrigerator.

I serve a mint sauce with leg of lamb that is super! Use one jar mint jelly, one jar red currant jelly, 1 jar chili sauce, and 1 stick of butter. Melt slowly and serve hot over lamb and rice.

Mint vinegar is simple to make. Cut several sprigs of mint and arrange them loosely in a jar. Cover this with cider vinegar, cap and place the jar in a sunny window for about three weeks. At the end of this period, strain off the mint, rebottle, and seal. Mint vinegar is a nice addition to a tossed salad.

A woodland tea party, using wild mint tea, can be topped off with a mint wafer. Just dip the washed and dried leaf in a stiff egg white, roll in either granulated or powdered sugar and place on waxed paper for the wafer to dry. This is more successful on a sunny, dry day.

Each plant has various degrees of minty qualities and flavor. Experiment with several and find your preference.



THISTLE (*Cirsium vulgare*)

FLOWERS: June - September

DESCRIPTION: Tall, heavily branching plant. Leaves sharp-pointed edges, bristles on top. Stickers all the way up the stem. Composite Family.

HABITAT: Pastures, fields, waste ground, roadsides, railroads



144 LOCATION: Statewide

COLLECTION: May - June

USES: Potherb, vegetable

This formidable pest an edible? "Never!" I thought. Sources on wild edibles indicated I was wrong and since I am game to tackle any new edible, I went in search of the thistle.

The early leaves may be cooked as a potherb along with poke and mustard. While this is tasty and not disagreeable, I was still anxious to try the bloom shoots. The first problem you encounter is collecting it. Collection **MUSTS** for thistle picking include clippers and gloves. Cut the thistle stalk when young. Field strip it of all leaves and thorny stickers with the help of scissors. I find that the outer rind of the stem peels off rather easily, taking the stickers off with it, leaving the remains as organic vegetation. This I call field stripping.

In the field stripped condition, I put the stalk in a plastic bag to bring home. Peel all of the outer rind off the stem and cut into 3" or 4" sections. Boil these stalks for a few minutes in salted water and douse with butter. The taste is quite good. Stems gathered as late as July have been fibrous and tough, although tasty. We ate them like artichokes, pulling the stems through the teeth and discarding the stringy part.

Good, bad or indifferent, I dare say not many dinner parties could offer such an unusual fare. Who knows, it may even catch on!!!!!!